

**THE SOCIAL SIGNIFICANCE OF
OUR INSTITUTIONS: AN ORATION
DELIVERED BY REQUEST OF THE
CITIZENS AT NEWPORF, R. I.,
JULY 4TH, 1861**

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The Social Significance of Our Institutions: An Oration delivered by request of the citizens at newporf, R. I., July 4th, 1861 by Henry James

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HENRY JAMES

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DELIVERED BY REQUEST OF THE CITIZENS AT NEWPORT, R. I.,

JULY 4TH, 1861.

BY HENRY JAMES.

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[The Oration as printed contains several passages omitted in the delivery.]

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ORATION.

A FRIEND observed to me a few days since, as I accepted the invitation with which your Committee of Arrangements has honored me, to officiate as your orator on this occasion, that I could hardly expect, under the circumstances, to regale my auditors with the usual amount of spread-eagleism. I replied, that that depended upon what he meant by spread-eagleism. If he meant what was commonly meant by it, namely, so clearly defined a Providential destiny for our Union, that, do what we please, we shall never fall short of it, I could never, under any circumstances, the most opposed even to existing ones, consent to flatter my hearers with that unscrupulous rubbish. No doubt many men, whose consciences have been drugged by our past political prosperity, do fancy some such inevitable destiny as this before us, — do fancy that we may become so besotted with the lust of gain as to permit the greatest rapacity on the part of our public servants, the most undisguised and persistent corruption on the part of our municipal and private agents, without forfeiting the Providential favor. From that sort of spread-eagle-

ism I told my friend that I hoped we were now undergoing a timely and permanent deliverance. But if he meant by that uncouth word an undiminished, yea, a heightened confidence in our political sanity and vigor, and in the fresh and glowing manhood which is to be in yet larger measure than ever the legitimate fruit of our institutions, I could assure him that my soul was full of it, and it would be wholly my fault if my auditors did not feelingly respond to it.

I never felt proud of my country for what many seem to consider her prime distinction, namely, her ability to foster the rapid accumulation of private wealth. It does not seem to me a particularly creditable thing, that a greater number of people annually grow richer under our institutions than they do anywhere else. It is a fact, no doubt, and like all facts has its proper amiable signification when exposed to the rectifying light of Truth. But it is not the fact which in a foreign land, for example, has made my heart to throb and my cheeks to glow when I remembered the great and happy people beyond the sea, when I thought of the vast and fertile land that lay blossoming and beckoning to all mankind beyond the setting sun. For there in Europe one sees this same private wealth, in less diffused form, it is true, concentrated in greatly fewer hands, but at the same time associated in many cases with things that go every way to dignify it or give it a lustre not its own, — associated with traditional family refine-

ment, with inoffensive unostentatious manners, with the practice of art and science and literature, and sometimes with the pursuit of toilsome and honorable personal adventure. Every one knows, on the other hand, how little *we* exact from our rich men; how meagre and mean and creeping a race we permit our rich men to be, if their meanness is only flavored with profusion. I have not been favored with a great many rich acquaintance, but still I have known a not inconsiderable number, and I have never found them the persons to whom one would spontaneously resort in his least personal moments, or communicate with the most naturally in his hours of the purest intellectual elation or despondency. Of course I have known exceptions to this rule, men whose money only serves to illustrate their superior human sweetness, men of whose friendship everybody is proud. But as a general thing, nevertheless, one likes best to introduce one's foreign acquaintance, not to our commercial nabobs, who aggravate the price of house-rent and butcher's meat so awfully to us poor Newporters; not to our fast financiers and bank cashiers, who on a salary of three thousand a year contrive to support in luxury, beside their proper wife and offspring, a dozen domestic servants and as many horses; but to our, in the main, upright, self-respecting, and, if you please, untutored, but at the same time unsophisticated, children of toil, who are the real fathers and mothers of our future distinctive manhood.

No; what makes one's pulse to bound when he remembers his own home under foreign skies, is never the rich man, nor the learned man, nor the distinguished man of any sort who illustrates its history, for in all these petty products almost every country may favorably, at all events tediously, compete with our own; but it is all simply the abstract manhood itself of the country, man himself unqualified by convention, the man to whom all these conventional men have been simply introductory, the man who—let me say it—for the first time in human history finding himself in his own right erect under God's sky, and feeling himself in his own right the peer of every other man, spontaneously aspires and attains to a far freer and profounder culture of his nature than has ever yet illustrated humanity.

Shallow people call this pretension of ours the offspring of national vanity, and stigmatize it as implying the greatest immodesty in every one who asserts it. Is it not the same as saying, they ask, that ignorance is as good as experience, weakness as good as skill, nature as good as culture, the crude ore as good as the polished metal which is extracted from it? I will show you the absurdity of this criticism in a few moments, when I show you the peculiar foundation which the sentiment in question, the sentiment of human equality, claims in our historic evolution and growth. For the present, I have a word more to say in regard to the contrasts of European and American thought and aspiration.

No American, who is not immersed in abject spread-eagleism,—that is to say, no American who has had the least glimpse of the rich social promise of our institutions, or of the free play they accord to the spiritual activities of our nature,—values the mere political prestige of his nation, or the repute it enjoys with other nations, as the true ground of its glory. Much less, of course, does he esteem the mere *personnel* of his government as conferring any distinction upon him. Loyalty, which is a strictly personal sentiment, has long given place even in the English bosom where it was native, to patriotism, which is a much more rational sentiment. Loyalty bears to patriotism the same relation that superstition bears to religion. The zealot worships God, not as an infinite Spirit of Love, but as a finite person: not for what He is inwardly in himself, but for what He may outwardly be to the worshipper. He adores him, not for what alone renders him worthy of adoration, namely, his essential humanity, that infinitely tender sympathy with his infirm creature which leads him forever to humble himself that the latter may be exalted, but simply because he is eminent in place and power above all beings, and so is able to do all manner of kindness to those who please him, and all manner of unkindness to those who displease him. Exactly so the loyalist worships his king or his queen,—not for their radiant human worth; not for the uses their great dignity promotes to the common or associated life;